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A Lutheran Response to Luther's Unsettling Antisemitism

Allen Jorgenson¹

First, let me thank Rabbi Telushkin for his wise words, and his invitation for me to think through, with you, how passion has usurped ethics in the thought, and life, of Martin Luther, especially as evidenced in his hostility towards the Jews.

Steven Katz, in *The Holocaust in Historical Context* has noted that Luther “is often described as the single most important source of later, obsessive German antisemitism and is held accountable for the enduring hatred of the Jews” (Katz 1995, 386-387). He goes on to note that there is “considerable truth in this accusation” (Katz 1995, 386-387). The conversation we are having today is incredibly important for many reasons, not least of which is that the institution hosting this conversation bears Luther’s name. But beyond this is the question concerning what to do with someone whose legacy is marred by horrific and unconscionable diatribes. Alas, Luther is but a singular instance of what holds true for many other people whose lives have impacted world history. Is it possible to separate the wheat from the weeds, and then to sift the wheat from the chaff? What do we do with Luther’s treatment of the Jewish people?

Luther’s animus to the Jews might seem surprising in light of his early compassion and interest in them. We read, for instance, in “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” (1523):

Therefore, I would request and advise that one deal gently with them and instruct them from Scripture; then some of them may come along. Instead of this, we are trying only to drive them by force, slandering them, accusing them of having Christian blood if they don’t stink, and I know not what other foolishness. Again, when we forbid them to labor and business and have any human fellowship with us, thereby forcing them into usury, how is that supposed to do them any good? (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 83)

Luther seems to be challenging many of the commonplace stereotypes associated with the Jewish people of his day. But then, 23 years later we read this same Luther commending rulers to “burn down their synagogues ... force them to work and deal harshly with them, as Moses did in the wilderness, slaying three thousand lest the whole people perish” (Luther 1971, 291). Later he writes, “If this does not help we must drive them out like mad dogs” (Luther 1971, 291). He also suggests restricting their travel (Luther 1971, 276), the confiscation of their prayer books, the forbidding of public prayer and education, as well as uttering “the name of God within our hearing” (Luther 1971, 286).

This horrid and drastic shift in language has long bewildered interpreters of Luther. Why this change? Did Luther’s theology shift? Did he have experiences that he was reacting against? Did he imbibe some new anti-Jewish texts?

Aarne Siirala, a former professor at Luther, surveyed responses to some of these questions in a LWF document. He referenced Luther’s own estimation that “The Jews had

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begun to act quite differently from what he had experienced in the early 1520's" (Siirala 1964, 350). He also notes a common German Reformation antipathy toward usury, associated with the Jewish people, and their supposed interactions with "the Turks" (Siirala 1964, 351). These suggestions are not altogether satisfying. The editors to his 1546 "On the Jews and their Lies" ask whether this change can be attributed to declining health, frustration with problems associated with the development of the Reformation, and untoward experiences with Jews. These explanations, too, seem too weak to explain Luther's shift from a seeming compassion for the Jewish people to a blind passion as evidenced in the very hostile "Against the Jews and their Lies."

Brooks Shramm, in his introduction to "Martin Luther, the Bible and the Jewish People: A Reader" reframes the conversation:

To be sure, one can speak of an intensification of anti-Jewish rhetoric toward the end of his life – especially with regard to the question of what should be done about the Jews – but Luther *theological* evaluation of Judaism and the Jewish people remains essentially unchanged from the earliest stages of his career." (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 3)

Shramm isn't so interested in how Luther's approach to the Jews has *changed*, but rather he is attentive to how his thought *has remained the same*. This continuity he identifies with his theological assessment of the Jews. So, we might ask what was this theological assessment? You see something of this as early as Luther's 1515-16 Lecture on Romans, where he writes:

... we teach that when we see the fall of Jews or heretics or others, we should consider not those who fell but the work of God in them, so we may learn to fear God.... (Luther 1972, 428)

The Jewish people are here compared to heretics, which is to say, theirs was a religion gone bad. What is the basis for this assessment? In this text on Romans, and elsewhere, we read of Luther's affront at Jewish self-identification as children of God by virtue of their birth. He interprets this claim to mean that the rest of humanity are not children of God and cannot be, and so are damned as a result (Luther 1972, 7). Further to this, being an inheritor of the promises of God by virtue of birth and circumcision flies in the face of justification by faith alone (Luther 1971, 148-50). For the Reformer who staked his life on the belief that we are saved by grace through faith for Christ's sake, this is anathema. And so, Thomas Kaufmann notes that, for Luther, Jewish existence is under God's wrath (Kaufmann 2006, 72). Why are the Jewish people under the wrath of God in "On the Jews and their Lies" Luther writes that

The very reason for their condemnation is that they possess [God's] commandment and yet do not keep it, but violate it constantly. (Luther 1971, 168)

How is it that they violate the covenant? Luther claims that they violate it by imagining themselves to be right in God's sight by virtue of what they do, rather than what God does. These children of God by birth maintain their status with God by their good works. Luther holds no truck with such a claim. And so Shramm is correct in his assessment that

Thus for Luther ... the Jew – and Judaism – represent the negative religious standard against which all other negative religious phenomena are finally measured [so that] it follows that the ultimate human problem that Christ and the gospel have to remedy is the Jew inside us all. (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 8)

To sum up so far: Luther's animus toward Judaism is a life-long posture, and the figure of the Jew is a central concern throughout his career. We see the latter most especially in his work as an interpreter of Scripture (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 4).

So, what then are Luther's thoughts regarding Judaism and Scripture? Thomas Kaufmann notes that Luther consistently refused to acknowledge Rabbinic Judaism as a legitimate way to interpret Scripture (Kaufmann 2006, 96). Why? Because Luther considers the Hebrew Bible to be a Christian text because of its "promise of the coming of the Messiah and faith in that promise" as evidenced in the characters inhabiting the Hebrew Bible (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 13). This faith, which Luther regularly identifies in the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible, is the same faith celebrated in the Christian church. Abraham, Sarah, and others were really Christians *avant le temps*.

Reading the Hebrew Bible via the interpretive lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the *sine qua non* for a proper interpretation of Scripture. For this reason, the Jews are "an utter aberration" insofar as Christianity rather than rabbinic Judaism is the legitimate heir of the faith tradition of the Hebrew Bible (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 13). Luther sees Christianity as a continuation of this ancient faith tradition rather than a replacement (Shramm and Stjerna 2012 11, 12). In Romans 11, Paul uses the metaphor of the Gentiles being a wild olive shoot being grafted onto the rich root of Judaism (v. 17). But what Luther has in mind might be pictured rather something like a tree trunk, with its lead removed because of disease, and so replaced by a grafting of Gentiles in its place. The Gentiles have become inheritors of the faith of the Hebrew Scriptures. Judaism has been removed and Christianity has become the crown of the tree. Consider Luther's comments on Romans 11:

... salvation has come to the Gentiles by the fall of the Jews, in order that their fall might not entirely be barren of fruit and an evil thing without any good. (Luther 1972, 426)

To be sure, Luther hopes for the raising of the removed branches, that they might again feed upon the rich root of the faith tradition of the Hebrew Bible. Katz notes that Luther was interested in demolishing Judaism rather than murdering Jews (Katz, 1995 391, 394). He would like to see the Jewish branches back on the tree of the faith of the Hebrew Bible. But for him, the only way back to the tree is by faith in the Messiah, that is Jesus Christ, a conviction he gleams from his Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible. Any other reading of the text is not only mistaken, but actually dangerous. For that reason, Luther was especially anxious that some reformers were beginning to study with Rabbis. Shramm writes

For Luther, there could be no compromise on this most basic of all theological issues. Jewish interpreters, and Christians who interpreted like Jews, had to be attacked and defeated on the Old Testament battlefield, because everything, from a religious point of view was at stake. (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 13)

And so, Shramm notes, “Luther perceived in Jewish readings of the Old Testament a genuine threat” (Shramm and Stjerana 2012, 13).

This is why Luther is so insistent on underscoring how the Jewish people live an impoverished existence: this is proof that they have fallen out of favour with God, who blesses those with whom the Divine is pleased. Luther makes much of this in his commentary on Genesis 12 (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 132, 134). Luther avers that

[The Jews] have now been living for almost 1500 years under great hardships and in uninterrupted captivity, and they have nothing of promises of which the Lord is speaking here. If God is truthful in His promises, then they must be liars; and through their unbelief they have forfeited these promises and are no longer the seed of Abraham to which these promises were given. (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 134)

This purported wretched state of Jewish existence is proof, for Luther, that the Jews are cursed by God. And this curse means that they have fallen from the olive tree. This assessment is consistent throughout the career of Luther. There is a kind of stridency in texts such as these that smacks, finally I think, of fear.

Luther’s hostility to the Jewish people is grounded in fear: fear of being wrong, fear of being excluded and fear of his doubts. Of course, Luther was not and is not unique in having such fears. In his hostile writings concerning the Jewish people, Luther reiterates themes advanced in the Middle Ages, and commonplace in the dark history of Christianity’s relationship to Judaism. It is also frequently noted that Luther’s antipathy toward the Jews is equalled by measure when we read his invectives hurled against the pope and the Turks. And yet, as noted by Shramm, the other two had the advantages of being powerful forces at some distance from the Reformer (Shramm and Stjerna 2012, 9). The Jews in Luther’s backyard did not have these luxuries of distance and power. When the flame of hatred was fanned, they were under fire.

To summarize again: Luther’s hostility to Judaism was a perennial feature in his writings, and is rooted, above all, in his refusal to countenance a Rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, fearful that Christianity itself is under threat from an alternate reading of this ancient text. Luther has taken hold of the Hebrew Bible and claimed it for Christianity. I find this seizure of the Hebrew Bible and refusal to countenance a Rabbinic reading of it akin, in a fashion, to the so-called discovery of the supposedly “New World” by explorers in the 15th and 16th century, the very time period during which Luther lived his life. The parallels, in some ways are apt.

Europeans Settlers came to America, to what is also called Turtle Island, to draw resources for their economies at home, pillaging the homelands of others for their own purposes. In like manner, Christians too often rip texts from the Hebrew Bible, violently interpreting it without attention to its context. And just as Settlers in this land have marginalized and demonized the Indigenous inhabitants of Turtle Island, Christians have expelled and obliterated Rabbinic readings of the Hebrew Bible, not to mention the Jewish people themselves. And just as Settlers have demanded the assimilation of Indigenous populations for their full inclusion in the body politic, so Luther refused any reading of the Hebrew Bible by Jews who did not become Christians.

The analogy, of course, is not perfect; but it can be instructive, I think. By comparing the relationship of Luther to the Jewish people and their scripture, to the relationship of Settlers to Turtle Island and its Indigenous inhabitants, I hope to accentuate some learnings that might be of aid. And so, finding a way forward in dealing with the legacy of Luther might be informed, in part, by what we have learned from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) process. The TRC was tasked with addressing the attempt to enforce the assimilation of the First Peoples of this land through the residential school system, where children were assaulted in every way imaginable. The assimilation of a people is, of course, a genocide. The TRC demonstrated that, and so invites us to ask what else we have learned from this process. So, what have we learned?

1. We have learned that there is no reconciliation without truth telling.
2. We have learned that reconciliation is a process.
3. We have learned that beneath the whole mess of the Residential School System and the tragedy of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is systemic racism.
4. We have learned that not so many have learned what we have learned.

Let me make some comments on each of these, as they apply to the matter at hand.

First, we know that there is no reconciliation without truth telling. Some of this truth telling has happened in the context of the Lutheran church. The Lutheran World Federation made a formal statement regarding Luther's anti-Jewish texts:

The sins of Luther's anti-Jewish remarks, the violence of his attacks on the Jews, must be acknowledged with deep distress. And all occasions for similar sin in the present for the future must be removed from our churches. (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada 1995)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), which is a member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) issued a statement containing the wording from the LWF 1984 condemnation of Luther's anti-Jewish writings, along with Canadian contextual considerations on "the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau and other Nazi death camps" and the fiftieth anniversary of the execution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, noting

Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, we affirm our fervent wish to live our faith in Jesus Christ in love and full respect for the Jewish people. Anti-Semitism is an affront to the Gospel, a contradiction of its central teachings, and a violation of our hope and calling. We pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry in our own circles and in the society around us. Finally, we pray that greater understanding and cooperation may continually grow between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish Community in Canada. (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada 1995)

These statements are important markers in the lives of Lutherans and Jews in Canada, but we might query how widely known this statement is, and how we can better live into its goal of "greater understanding and cooperation between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish

community in Canada.” How many Lutherans know this truth that has been told? This brings us to our second learning.

Reconciliation is a process, and to return to Rabbi Telushkin’s talk, we need to understand it as an ethical process. We have learned from the TRC in Canada that reconciliation is like walking up a down escalator: the moment you stop walking up you continue back down to where you started. Working toward right relations with our Jewish brothers and sisters demands ongoing work, and I think that this is especially the case in our need to consider how we read, use, and interpret the Hebrew Bible. At Luther we have been especially fortunate in having Daniel Maoz, our Jewish Scholar in Residence, to help us in this regard, and I covet such an opportunity for Lutherans across Canada. Just as the TRC invites Settlers to learn from the people Indigenous to this land, so Christians would be wise to learn from those who live most deeply in the Hebrew Bible.

In some ways, for Christians, Paul might be of aid to us here. Lutherans today would be well served by revisiting Paul’s analogy of Gentile stocks grafted onto a well-established olive tree. The grafted branches only do well when the natural tree is healthy. In a way, then, the health of Christianity is contingent on the health of Judaism. When Judaism suffers, so do we. When Judaism thrives, so do we. There is a spiritual truth here that we can also apply to our present context: the health of Canada and the church in Canada is contingent on the well-being of our Indigenous neighbours. Well-being is not a zero-sum affair. I don’t fare better when you are worse off. In fact, in this season of colds and flus, we know the opposite is the case.

Third, we need to acknowledge the ways in which racism undergirds much of the hostility between peoples here in Canada and around the world. In addition to the issue of racism, we also need to acknowledge the dangers of religious superiority. The -isms work together, that way. Feelings of religious superiority are as dangerous for the health of the body politic as is racism. Further to this, we need to understand that both racism and religious superiority exist at both systemic and individual levels and are inter-related. I am a racist because I live in a racist world. The minute I quit fighting the racist in me is the moment that I begin to assault my humanity. There is no escaping this struggle. These things are in the air we breathe, and a posture of constant vigilance is needed to counter their odious effects.

Lastly, we have learned from the TRC that very few people have this important national project on their mind, and fewer have it in their hearts, and still fewer have it in their agendas. Why are so many Canadians uninterested in reconciliation with the First Peoples of Turtle Island? I sometimes think this to be the case because we quickly go to a place of guilt when we realize we have done wrong, and this guilt takes shape in us in a habit of shame. So, we tend to turn from things that make us feel guilty. Many of us have forgotten the truth that doing the right thing is always good for you. Doing the right thing is always good for you, even if the upside of this is not immediately evident. I think we are well served by hearing stories of how reconciliation –between Christians and Jews; and between Settlers and the First Peoples – enhances lives and opens pathways for possibilities otherwise not imagined. Truth and reconciliation enrich lives; giving us more not less. This has certainly been my experience. We need to share this good news.

In conclusion, I need to ponder for a moment, Rabbi Telushkin’s invitation for me to consider how to respond to Luther’s passion for faith over ethics. I begin with some words from Luther himself as quoted in *The Book of Concord*:

Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old 'Adam' and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and all powers, and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. ... Thus, it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire. (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 576)

Faith here is not an idea, nor is it a decision, although both are involved at some level. Rather, faith is our very way of being in light of our encounter with God. When God shows up, faith is born. And, this faith works. This faith works in the sense that it does work informed by its encounter with God. This is why Luther says that faith and works cannot be separated.

Alas, our dear Martin's faith sometimes was united with works that were malicious in-deed. But if he is correct – that faith and works are indivisible – then we might ask what he was trusting in in those moments in which he demonized the religious other. Was he trusting in a God who created the world with a diversity that deserves celebration? Was he trusting in a God whose vision for the healing of the cosmos includes a healing of the religions? Was he trusting in a whom, or a what? Of course, I will never know, and so I will leave it to the Master of the Universe to judge him.

Luther's legacy is marred, this much is sure. And so, we return now to the question behind this conference: what are we to do with a public figure whose important contributions to society are marred by abhorrent attitudes and activities? Are we to bury the malicious side of his life? No, that is manifestly impossible. Luther is a whole. We cannot cut out Luther the anti-Semite from Luther the theologian. So, some suggest that we bury Luther altogether, malicious and benevolent sides both: that we leave him beyond in the dark caverns of history. But no, that seems both foolish and impossible. Impossible because his fingerprints can be found all around us: in the notion of the secular, in the welfare state, in the freedom of conscience, in the affirmation of the ordinary. But it is foolish, too, because Luther still has things to say to us: he invites us to imagine a God who abides with people in their pain; he invites us to read Scripture with the expectation of encountering a sacred mystery; he reminds us that God's love is not conditional, a message embodied in Jesus of Nazareth; he reminds us that love of neighbour is the counter-point of faith, and that our sworn duty before God is to care for the person before me, the community around me. Luther's legacy is surely stained. Luther is complicated and needs to be kept complicated. His legacy is complex, this much is sure.

But his complicated and complex legacy – in no small part – resides within me. What am I to do? I will read Luther against Luther when his passions run amok. I will counter his odious passages with his proclamation of grace. I will hold Luther accountable to Luther. This is the ethical thing to do, and the only true way in which I can grant him the respect he deserves.

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